Guilt and Faith
Luke 3:7-22
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John the Baptist is one of the most intriguing characters in the pages of the New Testament. He came out of the desert around thirty A.D. preaching that the Kingdom of God was at hand. His appearance was eloquently dramatic - dressed in the rough garb of a wilderness hermit, eating locusts and wild honey. His appearance invoked the words of the Prophet Isaiah,

"Prepare ye the way of the Lord.
Make straight in the desert
a highway for our God."

He evoked the image and memory of the great prophets of Israel: 400 years had passed since anyone had spoken like John the Baptist. And so the people came out of the towns and villages to see him and hear him thundering on the banks of the Jordan River.

We don't know exactly who he was. Apparently he was related to Jesus. Some scholars have deduced that he was orphaned at an early age by his elderly parents and then adopted by one of the rigidly ascetic desert communities of the day. The Essenes, for instance, were fanatical in their adherence to the moral law, they practiced ritual bathing or baptism, they were celibate and sustained their community by adopting and raising orphans, and they were totally intense in the conviction that the Messianic Age was about to dawn.

John the Baptist fits that pattern: he saw his mission as preparing men for the coming of the Messiah. He told people to repent from the wrong they were doing and to be baptized in order to be ready. He told them about a day of fire and judgment, when the wheat would be separated from the chaff.

John's style was to employ guilt. He tried to make people good by causing them to feel bad. He compared the very people who came out to hear him with snakes that scurry out from under the rocks in order to escape fire. He made people feel bad, remorseful, angry with themselves, guilty.

And then one day Jesus came to the banks of the river to hear John. There is endless scholarly debate about why He wanted to be baptized by John. The best explanation, I think, is that He appreciated John's integrity and courage, and that He saw in John the beginnings of a movement toward God and a renewal of morality and justice and righteousness - a movement with which He wanted to identify.

And so He walked into the waters of the Jordan River to be baptized, and what happened then is most significant: in fact, set in the context of John's fierce harangues, rather startling. A voice came to Him personally, "You are my Son: with You I am most pleased." Unlike the rest of what was going on at the moment, His experience was devoid of guilt and remorse. It was a positive, supportive, loving and therefore inspiring experience; not frightening, negative, threatening. And, I would submit, that what we have here, in this inevitable comparison between John the Baptist and Jesus, is a good illustration of the role guilt plays in the Christian Faith, for better or for worse.

I will long remember one of the most disturbing experiences I have ever had. It came in a lecture by a leading Chicago psychiatrist and professor in the University of Chicago Medical School. He was speaking to students in the Divinity School and he began by asserting that clergymen were "guilt-mongers", and for one hour he scored organized religion for implanting, cultivating, nurturing and even creating a sense of guilt in the hearts of men. He suggested that guilt has always been the lever the Church has used to pry men inside. He pointed out that Christian Faith begins with an insistence on man's sin, and that many sermons depend on the listener feeling guilty. And the cause is not just petty wrong doing. Rather the Christian Faith seems to be telling a man that he is an offense to God simply by being: he was born that way and there is no way he can change that unhappy situation.

The Doctor suggested that it amounted to psychological blackmail: that if a man thought about it long enough and was convinced of its truth he had no alternative but to join the Church. For having convinced him of his terrible guilt the Church then modestly offers itself as the only way to be free of that guilt.

Here was a man suggesting that Christianity could be and often was injurious to the mental health of people: criticizing the Church - not for all the typical reasons, but out of a deep concern for the welfare and peace and happiness of people.

It was a disturbing experience precisely because the Doctor had hold of something terribly true about much religion. Religion ordinarily deals with guilt in one of three ways - and two of them are not very good and therefore not very healthy. First, there is the type of religion that encourages and increases guilt feelings. It is usually moralistic religion and it is very popular. By some strange logic Christian preaching, for a lot of people, means a series of "convicting" statements, documenting in detail, how sinful and terrible they are: and the quality of the preaching is determined by the amount of guilt it heaps on the backs of the hearers. Some people don't think they've heard a sermon unless they've been made to feel guilty. Some people rather enjoy it: they don't feel good about their faith until they feel bad about themselves. The threat of eternal hell keeps these people on the straight and narrow: and guilt keeps them coming back to Church. They make, by the way, very loyal church members.

The second way religion deals with guilt is to ignore it. Masquerading as grace, the theology of this approach indicates that there is nothing for which you ever need to feel guilty. The faithful are simply advised to "think positively": utopia will come when all guilt is erased forever from the human conscience. This is very treacherous going, for it is easy, unfortunately, to hear this point of view whenever the Bible - or the minister - starts talking about grace. "God loves you as you are" does not mean "there is nothing for which you should ever feel guilty". But unfortunately it is a rather simple-minded and therefore appealing conclusion.

The third way religion can deal with guilt is to do just that - deal with it: take it seriously: learn what it is. This, I believe, is the method of the Bible: the method of Jesus: the method of peace and freedom from guilt. It begins by taking guilt very seriously and listening carefully to what is known about guilt.

Sigmund Freud taught that "feelings of guilt are the result of social constraint. The feelings are born in the mind of the child when his parents scold him, and are nothing other than the fear of losing the love of parents who have become suddenly hostile". (See Paul Tournier, Guilt and Grace, P.63).Freud went on to trace guilt in adults to the fear of certain societal taboos which take the place of the parental influence.

Alfred Adler suggested that all guilt is rooted in a man's refusal to accept his inferiority: i.e. we know that we aren't what we pretend to be - and we feel guilty about the deception. Karl Jung taught that guilt occurs when one refuses to accept oneself wholly, to integrate into consciousness that unpleasing part of ourselves which he called "the shadow".

These pioneers in the field of psychiatric theory all differentiated between different types of guilt: functional guilt - which is superimposed by someone else, and value guilt - an internal sense of having betrayed an authentic standard. One of the most helpful concepts for me is contained in philosophy of Martin Buber, who differentiated between genuine guilt and neurotic guilt. Neurotic guilt can be treated: it can be made to disappear or at least diminished through understanding and personal growth. But genuine guilt, Buber and others suggest, quickly becomes a problem of religion, and can be broken only by grace and forgiveness.

One hundred years ago learned men looked forward to the day when mankind would be free from guilt. The assumption was that all guilt was neurotic. But the more the psychiatrists and psychologists thought about it, the more neurotic guilt they were able to treat, the deeper the problem became. There seems to be another kind of guilt - felt deeply by all men; a type of guilt that can only be called theological. And today, rather than assuming that increased knowledge will allow us to rid ourselves of all vestiges of guilt, many professionals are beginning to look again at the rather old fashioned religious methodology of repentance, forgiveness and freedom. Among many sensitive practitioners there is a new appreciation of the confessional - and many psychiatrists know that they often play a priestly role by forgiving their clients.

Enough of the academics. Paul Tournier, Swiss Psychiatrist and Theologian, states flatly that guilt is universal: that no man is without guilt. (Guilt and Grace, see Chapter VII "True and False Guilt" and Chapter XVIII "The Condition of Man"). Think about that for a minute. We do carry a lot of guilt around with us: guilt that we did something wrong in the past the memory of which continues to haunt us: guilt that we are not living up to the expectations others have of us: guilt that we are not better husbands, wives, parents, better professionals, better Christians, better citizens: guilt about the truth - that our public behavior does not always reflect our best instincts: guilt that we do not always act in ways which we know are good and right and true. John Ruskin once noted that "Life without industry is guilt", and I know the truth of that. If I sit around very long doing nothing I begin to feel guilty. Tournier suggests that guilt is the "seasoning of life" and teaches that it is a mistake to see all guilt as a negative force and most unhealthy simply to ignore it.

Guilt becomes a negative force when it is used as a motivator: when someone - a parent, teacher, or the church - attempts to exercise control by increasing feelings of guilt. Guilt becomes equally unhealthy when it is repressed, unrecognized: it quickly leads to anger, anxiety, dread, and sense of self-loathing.

And at this point the way of Jesus - the way of faith - becomes very helpful. Jesus never played on people's guilt. In fact, he steadfastly refused to stand in judgment of those who were already aware of their guilt. In the eighth chapter of John we find Him confronting a woman who had committed adultery and was about to be stoned. She was guilty. Jesus did not suggest that she had not sinned. He did not deny her guilt: she would not have been helped if He had told her that it was

all right to do what she had done: instead He said to the ones who were very busy gathering little piles of rocks: "Let him who is without sin throw the first one". And to the woman He said: "I do not condemn you; go and do not sin again".

That is to say, simultaneously he suggested that the self-righteous moralists could use a little sense of guilt: and the self-evident sinner could use a little grace, a little acceptance and forgiveness. Jesus understood that men who already feel guilty do not ordinarily become better when they are made to feel bad about themselves. Rather than convict men on the basis of their obvious failings and frailties, He held up before them what they could become and they became it. He treated men - not as eye-sores to God, but as children of God, and they began to act like it. He took a man by the name of Peter: rough, outspoken, vascillating fisherman and called him a Rock. And Peter became a Rock. It's curious that with the exception of our theology we seem to be learning the truth of that way of dealing with people.

We are learning the value of "positive reinforcement" in the educational process - i.e. that you don't help a student learn by reminding him that he's stupid. Similarly we are learning that children do far better when parents refrain from attacking their weaknesses and instead reward their strength.

Behavior modification programs with delinquent and pre-delinquent youth attempt to support and reward appropriate behavior.

The late Vince Lombardi, professional football coach, was able to call more out of his players than anyone else. To a man they testified that he did it by believing in them, by holding up before them a goal of becoming more than they were, instead of humiliating them for their mistakes.

Jesus knew that love is a better motivator than guilt: that people begin to be better when they feel better about themselves. Jesus knew that we cannot love, fully, openly, honestly until we sense that we are loved.

Christian Faith begins, not with the guilt of the individual, but with God's love for the individual. That was the way of Jesus. Notice that it does not ignore sin or immorality or guilt. It simply does not begin with it or predicate anything on it. God's love is first. And so the response of faith is to acknowledge guilt - precisely because we know ourselves to be loved: to confess and then to hear that most eloquent articulation of the Gospel - "We are forgiven".

The Danish Theologian, Soren Kierkegaard, one time wrote, "When the commandment to love one's neighbor is rightly understood, it also says the converse, 'Thou shalt love thyself in the right way'. If anyone, therefore, will not learn from Christianity to love himself in the right way then neither can he love his neighbor. He may perhaps cling to one of several other human beings but this is by no means loving one's neighbor. To love one's self in the right way, and to love one's neighbor, are absolutely analogous concepts, and are at the bottom one and the same". (Works of Love).

How shall we love ourselves? How shall we be free of the debilitating guilt we carry around with us? It helps, obviously, if there is someone who loves us and accepts and affirms us as we are; someone for whom we don't have to perform or disguise who we are. And that we can do for each other - in our marriages, in our family circles, and in our relationships within the Church - this community of the forgiven and the forgiving.

But beyond that we can walk to the banks of the Jordan River with our guilt in tow and there listen for a voice that says to all who come, "You are my son: you are my daughter: I am pleased with you."

That is the difference between guilt-ridden religion and honest Christian Faith. That - it is my deepest conviction - is the incredible nature of the Good News. Jesus' experience can be ours. It was not, I believe, reserved for Him alone. Rather it was the disclosure of a God who loves and accepts us as we are; a God who knows our failures, our sin, the reason for our guilt - a God who knows how much more we could love and live and be; a God whose power with us is never wielded in the form of guilt - inducing judgment - but always in the form of accepting, forgiving, renewing love.

To know that God - to lay bare one's heart and soul to that love is the only conversion experience we ever need. It is, and always will be, an intensely personal matter, as it was for Jesus. No one heard that voice but Him. It will happen, not once and for all, but again and again in life: moments of pure revelation in which we know ourselves to be known: moments when we know that we are free from guilt because we are loved by a God who is pleased with us and has forgiven us.

Hear the Good News
If a man is in Christ, he is a new person altogether -
the past is finished and gone; everything is fresh and new.
Friends: believe the Good News of the Gospel.
In Jesus Christ we are forgiven.
Amen.

Father, the good news is so good that we have trouble believing it. Help us to love ourselves, to understand that You love us: and free us, then to love, even as we are loved: Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.